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Excavations at Tura

In a recent letter, Mr. Edward F. Wente, Director of the Center in Cairo, describes excavations conducted at Tura, the site of the quarries from which the Egyptians obtained the fine white limestone used for the outer coating of the Pyramids. These quarries, situated only a few miles south of Cairo, were worked all during antiquity and indeed down to the present day, when a huge cement factory has been established in their vicinity. Mr. Wente has an exciting story to tell of recent developments at the site.

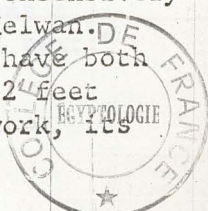
"For two years, an element of mystery has shrouded excavations conducted at Tura. The story of a man who, pursued by an angry conductor, fell or jumped from the suburban electric train that runs from Cairo to Helwan and landed at the bottom of the pit of an early dynastic tomb at Tura has appeared at intervals in the local press. Just how true this story is, I do not know, but it is a fact that in and around the Tura cement factory is spread an immense cemetery that dates as far back as the First Dynasty or perhaps even earlier.

"I have recently visited the site, which contains probably the largest cement plant in Egypt. The factory is a Swiss concern, and the management has been financing the clearing of the tombs, with Rashid Nuer supervising the archaeology. So far there has been no public announcement of the results of the excavations. Unlike most excavations, they are not under the direct administration of the Department of Antiquities, though I am vague about the administrative technicalities involved.

"It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of the topography of the site, for much of the cemetery is located amidst huge rotating cylinders, vats, and kilns, and new structures have already been erected on portions of the excavated area -- truly a unique situation in which to find some of the earliest Egyptian tombs. The necropolis is immense and only a small portion of it has been cleared -- this year, approximately 300 tombs.

"Most of these, like the majority of early dynastic graves, are of mud-brick. They contained crouched burials, the head generally to the north, supplied with simple accessories -- pots and stone vessels, some of fine craftsmanship, comparable with those found at Helwan. Unfortunately, no early dynastic inscriptions, aside from a few isolated signs on wine-jars, have been found, so accurate dating is a bit difficult.

"Most interesting for the history of the use of stone in architecture is the discovery of two large tombs of possible First Dynasty date, which employ stone more extensively than any tombs of the archaic period that I have seen, including those at Helwan. The large burial chambers, roughly 20 by 15 feet in plan and 10 feet high, have both floor and sides surfaced with limestone blocks approximately 10 feet long, 2 feet wide and 6 inches thick. Behind these facing slabs is a backing of stone-work, its



blocks, nicely hewn, of about the size of those of the Zoser enclosure wall at Saqqara. In fact, one has the impression that these two tombs may provide the missing link that has been sought showing the use of stone prior to the erection of the Zoser complex. The chambers are approached from the west by stone-lined stairways with stone portcullises. Oddly enough, chemical analysis has shown that the very hard limestone used in these tombs has come, not from the quarries nearby, so famous as a source for limestone in antiquity, but from a place in the Eastern Desert about twenty-five miles distant!

"Among and above these earliest tombs are Old and Middle Kingdom graves as well as late burials. Uninscribed limestone sarcophagi are found in abundance -- not surprising for a cemetery situated so close to the well-known quarries (which are now, incidentally, no longer accessible to the public). Several mud-brick tombs of mastaba type occur, grouped together in complex arrangements. In one case, I noticed small false doors on the east face.

"Finds from the Old and Middle Kingdoms include fragments of limestone statuettes, one possibly of the Third Dynasty, a statuette of the Middle Kingdom, beads, scarabs, cylinder seals, some interesting small ivory objects, and a Middle Kingdom jar with a rather difficult hieratic inscription of several lines. A number of pottery coffins of the late period were also found.

"Mr. Nuer told me that he discovered, east of the necropolis, traces of an ancient road paved in stone and sided by mud-brick walls, which led from the quarries to the cultivation.

"Considering the unique and difficult working conditions, Mr. Nuer must be commended for his careful work. Finds have been properly photographed and recorded. When the material is analyzed and published it should prove of great value to those interested in the burial customs of the average ancient Egyptian. The project will probably extend over a good number of years, as the cement factory expands into the necropolis."

The Book of Kemit

Those concerned with Egyptian literature will be interested in hearing of a new text of the Book of Kemit, as reported by Mr. Wente.

"Recently a well-known private collector has purchased fragments of a bowl inscribed in hieratic of the First Intermediate Period. At first glance, the text appeared to be another letter to the dead, but research by Dr. Goedicke of Brown University has identified it as part of the Book of Kemit, a text frequently copied in the form of a letter, but of rather unclear content. This is certainly the oldest example of the work yet discovered, and its presence on a bowl, on which also a red heart is pictured, leads to further speculation on the nature of the text. Was it originally a sort of formalized letter to the dead?

"Other surviving copies open with introductory formulae that are characteristically Theban, but the Theban formulae do not appear on any of the surviving fragments of this bowl; they could, of course, have been written on fragments that have been lost, but the hieratic itself does not appear to be Theban. Dr. Goedicke plans a further discussion of the Book of Kemit in the light of this newly discovered text."

Changes in Administration and Personnel

Both Mr. Wente and Dr. Williams, the second of the Center's Fellows in Egypt, have reported a rumored change in the Egyptian administration. Up to the present, the Department of Antiquities has been under the Ministry of Education, but it is now proposed to transfer it to the Ministry of National Guidance, which is, roughly speaking, the Government's public relations bureau, dealing with both foreigners and residents. As it is keenly aware of the value of public relations, cultural activities may prosper under its guidance.

It is a matter of common knowledge that President Nasser and most of his ministers, as well as a number of prominent archaeologists, have visited Russia during the past season. It is said that the Minister of Education, Kamal al-Din Hussein, made while there a number of cultural agreements, including one for teaching Russian in Egyptian secondary schools. It is also said that the Russians are negotiating for permission to excavate in Egypt during the coming season.

Among the scholars who went to Russia was one of the ablest of the Egyptian archaeologists, Labib Habichi, who has been doing excellent work in Upper Egypt. He has now gone to Cairo as assistant to Zaki Saad, in charge of excavations and field work. Farid el-Shabury and Shehata Adam have been transferred to Saqqara and Ibrahim Kamal has gone to Edfu. Mohammed Abd el-Zader has been assigned to Luxor. Among other changes are the appointments of Edward Ghazouli to the Coptic Museum and Zakariah Ghoneim to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Mr. Shabury had recently been transferred from Karnak to the West Bank of the Nile, where, under his able guidance, the erection of the stela of Amenhotep III behind the Colossi was speedily accomplished.

Work at the Egyptian Museum

The catalogue of canopic jars in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo is in full swing. Since the resources of the photographic department are being used to this end, some delay in private orders for photographs is inevitable.

The colossal head of Ramses II has been removed for expedition to Luxor, where it will be fitted to the headless statue of the king that stands in the first court of the temple there. Visitors to Upper Egypt may see the piece fully restored by next season.

Steuben Glass in Cairo

Dr. Williams reports that the Steuben collection, "Asian Artists in Crystal," recently shown in Cairo under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Education and the United States Embassy, has met with much favorable comment, "although not so much, of course, as the Bolshoi ballet," in Cairo a short time previously. This handsome collection reproduces in modern glass designs of Asiatic artists.

Mediaeval Egypt

In a letter describing the last tour of the season, Dr. John Alden Williams gives a vivid account of Cairene history in the Middle ages as illustrated by certain of the monuments.

"I conducted the last tour of the season to a group of monuments in the area of Bab al-Zuwayla, the southernmost of the three remaining gates of Fatimid Cairo. The four monuments -- the gate itself, built around 1086 by Badr al-Gamali, the Armenian restorer of the Fatimid state, the beautiful little Fatimid mosque of al-Salih Tala'i, built just outside the gate in 1160, the Mameluke mosque of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (c. 1415), just inside the gate, and, further up the street, the mosque-madrassa, sabil-kuttab, mausoleum, and khanqah of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri, the last Mameluke Sultan, who fell in 1516 in Syria, trying to stave off the Ottoman conquest of Egypt -- provide interesting documents for the history of Egypt in the mediaeval period.

"It will be remembered that Cairo was founded only in 971 by the anti-Caliphs, who hoped eventually to control the entire Islamic world. However, after a brilliant beginning, a series of lean years, followed by famine, plague, and civil disorder, during the long reign of the faineant Caliph al-Mustansir, made such control seem most unlikely. By 1072 the country was in anarchy, pillaged by lawless, feuding Turkish, Berber, and Sudanese troop-factions, and the Saljuk troops were advancing in Syria in the name of the Orthodox Abbasid Caliphs of Bagdad. In desperation, the Caliph entrusted most of his powers to a former Armenian slave, Badr al-Gamali, who was military governor of Acre. This wazir, whose tomb-mosque still dominates the Muqattam (the mosque of al-Juyushi), succeeded in restoring order with the help of his Syrian troops. He then proceeded to the fortification of the walls of the city, entrusting it to three architects, brothers from Edessa, in preparation for the expected Saljuk invasion.

"The gates are built in the fine masonry tradition of North Syria, an area where Hellenistic influence lingered long. Indeed, they seem far more Roman than Islamic. Although the Bab al-Zuwayla is perhaps inferior to its northern sister, Bab al-Futuh, it has a very honorable place in architecture, with its excellent stonework, its domed passage on pendentives, and its two oblong towers, and affords an interesting example of mediaeval oriental fortification before the Crusader castles had complicated the picture. It once stood nine feet above the ground level and was approached by stone ramps. Here was the place of public executions until the mid-nineteenth century; here the heads of malefactors were exposed, and here the last sultan-designate of the Mamelukes, Tuman Bey, was hanged by the victorious Ottomans in 1518. Here, too, until only a century ago the rulers of Egypt bade farewell to the Pilgrims' Caravan and welcomed its return from the holy cities of Arabia. Traditionally, a powerful and invisible Sufi saint passes through the gate, or (some would say) lives there, and bits of cloth are still tied to it by humble people who desire his aid. Indeed, each of the three gates has its saint, presumably buried under small domed structures just inside. I do not know if later rulers actually buried holy men there or if the aura of holiness that has always surrounded gates in the East, controlling as they do both past and future, has thus become personified.

"Badr al-Gamali's son, who continued as wazir after his father's death in 1094, took a step which had far-reaching consequences for the Fatimid Ismaili Shi'ite cause. On the death of al-Mustansir in the same year, he put the Caliph's more amenable younger son on the throne, and the elder son fled to the allied Assassins of Alamut, in Persia, where he was acknowledged as the true Imam. Today, his descendant the Aga Khan is Imam of one branch of the Ismailis, while the Bohra Ismailis follow an Imam deriving from the later Cairo branch.

"The history of the dynasty became a series of palace intrigues, mutinies, and assassinations; and battles with the Saljuk and with the Crusaders, who were attacking the dynasty's Palestinian possessions, drained the energies of the state. After the assassination of the Caliph al-Zafir by the son of the ruling wazir and the accession of the Caliph's four-year-old son in 1154, the future of the dynasty seemed grim indeed. The frantic women of the palace cut off their long hair and sent it to the governor of Ashmunayn, beseeching him to save the state. This energetic wazir, Salih al-Tala'i ibn-Ruzzik, apprehended the murderer of the last Caliph and crucified him on Bab al-Zuwayla. He succeeded, however, in staving off the end for only a few more years. The Franks in Palestine were pressing hard, and to save the head of Husayn, the martyred grandson of the Prophet, from falling into their hands, he transferred this holiest Shi'ite relic from threatened Askalon to Cairo and built a fine small mosque outside the walls to receive it. The women of the palace insisted, however, that the head be kept in the palace, and there it was kept in a shrine on the spot where now stands the modern mosque of Sayyidna Husayn, near Khan Khalili.

"The mosque of el-Salih, built in 1160, still survives as the last and one of the finest monuments of the Fatimid dynasty. It has had to be almost completely (but very well) restored in the present century. Its keel-shaped arches and arabesque stucco-work provide a link between the Azhar, the earliest monument of the Fatimid period, and the full flowering of Egyptian Islamic art under the Ayyubids and the Mamelukes. It also once boasted the earliest monumental bronze doors in Egypt: these are now in the Museum and replaced by copies. It is one of the rare examples of a "suspended" mosque, that is, one based on a lower story of shops (now below the rising street-level) and approached by a stairway.

"But the end of the Fatimid dynasty was now near. With the fall of Askalon, the road to Egypt was open and in 1167 Amalric, Frankish king of Jerusalem, stood at the gates of Cairo. In order to keep the unfortified city of Fustat, founded by 'Amr ibn-al-'As in 641, from falling into his hands, it was burnt to the ground, and Egypt's chief city thus perished.

"Once again, in desperation, the Fatimids turned for help, this time to their hereditary enemy, the Saljuk Atabeg of Damascus, who sent his lieutenant, the young Kurd Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin), to make common cause against the Crusaders. By 1171, Saladin was wazir and in a position to declare on the death of the Caliph that the country owed allegiance to the Abassids of Baghdad and thus to return the country to orthodoxy 'without so much as the butting of two goats.' He enlarged Cairo to absorb the refugees from ruined Fustat, he built the Citadel with the labor of Frankish prisoners and stones from the Queens' Pyramids at Giza, and again and again he worsted the Crusaders. Under his successors, the Azhar, chief center of Fatimid theology and propaganda, became the stronghold of Sunni orthodoxy.

"Saladin's dynasty, the Ayyubids, was short-lived. It was only a prelude to the rule of the Mamelukes (1250-1517). These slave praetorian guards succeeded finally in becoming a ruling corporation, renewing itself with purchased slaves after some experience with hereditary succession, and the ablest -- or most ruthless -- among them succeeded to the sultanate. With the fall of Baghdad and Persia to the Mongols, Cairo became the 'seat of the Caliphate' and the chief city of Islam. The Crusades had given Europe a taste for Eastern luxuries, and the highly taxed passage through Egypt of the entire spice and luxury trade from the Indian Ocean brought the Mamelukes such enormous wealth that Egypt prospered even under their misrule. Eager to perpetuate their names, these Turkish and Circassian soldiers of fortune, filled Cairo with beautiful mosques and religious foundations of all descriptions.

"One such is the mosque of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, just inside the Bab al-Zuwayla, where the state prison once stood. While a Mameluke amir, Mu'ayyad languished in that prison for treason, and vowed that if he lived to do so he would build a mosque on the site. He finally became sultan and kept his vow by razing the prison and the section of city wall nearest it and building (around 1415) the great mosque that now stands there. It has suffered much -- Mameluke structures were more often built for show than for eternity -- and the side porticos of the courtyard have disappeared. The oratory itself and the domed mausoleum of the sultan still stand, though much renewed. The dome of the mausoleum of his ladies has perished. The ceiling of the oratory is almost oppressively rich in gilt and carved wood; the roof, as usual, is supported on antique columns from earlier structures. The two lofty minarets were constructed on the two gate-towers of Bab al-Zuwayla to give them added height, and the dark, severely classical masonry of the gate contrasts oddly with the elegant, flowing Mameluke minarets, though they make a fine effect wherever visible from the city. The doors of the mosque are the most beautiful bronze doors Egypt produced; they were taken from the superb earlier madrasa of Sultan Hasan (c. 1360), near the Citadel.

"Further up the street is the complex of structures built by Qansuh al-Ghawri. There is material here for a philosopher. Where other sultans had been content with a collegiate mosque (madrasa) for their tombs, or a dervish convent, or a sabil-kuttab for dispensing the two mercies of drinking water and instruction in the Koran, al-Ghawri had them all. On one side is the great madrasa, built purposely to rival the rich and elegantly ornamented madrasa of his old master, Sultan Quayt Bey, perhaps the finest Circassian Mameluke structure. It is larger, to be sure, and may once have dazzled eyes, but it is greatly inferior to the structure of Quayt Bey. The artisanry -- for the formulae of decoration are established and tritely repeated -- is poor. In places, marble carving is filled with pitch rather than the usual fine mosaic and inlay. Again and again one is confronted with a striving for effect, awkwardness, and poor taste.

"Directly opposite is the building which included al-Ghawri's domed mausoleum, built hastily, so that it collapsed even before he died. The dome was replaced in the nineteenth century by a flat wooden ceiling. At one side of the door is a sabil-kuttab. The façades of both these major structures are still handsome, for architectural tradition often dies more slowly than decorative art.

"Behind the tomb was a dervish convent, which is now a public school. Richly decorated sitting-rooms for the family nearby are now a warehouse for the Ministry of Education. Indeed, the mausoleum itself has done duty as a storeroom, with the result that the inlaid marble floors have greatly suffered.

"One would like, parenthetically, to express the wish that important Islamic monuments were not used by the Ministry responsible for protecting them simply as available space. The house of Ibrahim Katkhuda al-Sinnari, one of Cairo's finest old mansions, is another case in point: it is (or was when I last tried to visit it) serving as a lumber-room. It is true that relatively few persons visit these monuments now, but, as Cairo modernizes at its dizzy pace, there will come a time when people realize what treasures they have -- or have lost. The Committee for the Preservation of Islamic Monuments can classify buildings and put them in the custody of the Ministry of Education, but quis custodet ipsos custodes?

"To return to al-Ghawri: It is ironic to reflect that his ambitious and rather bombastic group of monuments were erected as the money stopped. In 1492, Egypt had a terrible visitation of the plague, which killed upward of 10,000 a day at its

height. What next occurred was in the long run even more disastrous. By 1507, when the mosque was built, the Portuguese had circumnavigated Africa and were blocking the Red Sea to secure their new trade-route. Egypt's source of fabulous income dried up in the space of a few years. The state made up for the loss for a while by seizing the great private fortunes that had been built up during three hundred years of fatness. -- the army which marched to meet the Ottomans advancing in Syria was almost entirely equipped through extortion. Even more than the Ottoman conquest, the voyages of discovery put an end to Egypt's brilliant mediaeval period. But in looking at the art of al-Ghawri, one wonders when the end really came and what it was that first died -- the source of income, the dynasty, or the creative spirit."

New Publications

Dr. Williams announces the following publications from the Lebanon:

Kitab al-Intisar, or Refutation of al-Rawandi, re-edited, with accompanying translation into French by Albert Nadir. This "is perhaps the most important surviving source on the Mu'tazilite school of Islamic theology."

The mystical text al-Rasa'il al-Sughrah of Ibn 'Abbad al-Andalusi.

A modern translation of Aristotle's Politica, newly done from classical sources, has been published by the Paulists of Harissa; while this is not of great interest to the historian, it offers an interesting comparison with mediaeval Arabic Aristotelian texts.